PEARL

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PEARL

Pearl (Middle English Poem)

PEARL

RENDERED INTO MODERN
ENGLISH VERSE

BY

S. WEIR MITCHELL, M.D., LL.D.

NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.
1906

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The De Vinne Press

A FOREWORD

In the west midland of England, in the second half of the fourteenth century, lived a poet whose name no man knows to-day. A strange chance has preserved the manuscript of four of his poems. One of these, "Pearl," emblem of purity, has been the subject of much controversy as to whether it be the poetic record of a real loss in the guise of allegory, or an allegory based on an imagined grief.

About this question there has long raged a war of words. The last argument in favor of the merely allegorical nature of "Pearl" is from the able pen of Professor Schofield of Harvard. Not all scholars agree with him, and there are competent students of the fourteenth-century poems who still believe this noble poem to be the voice of a real grief in the form of an allegory. I am altogether incompetent to decide the question on scholarly grounds. When,

however, feeling that Professor Schofield might be right, I read again the stanzas which appeal to those who have suffered as this nameless poet seems to have done, I felt anew that this poem is surely the honest gift of a personal sorrow to the sorrow of all the after years.

This ably waged contest does not greatly concern me, to whom the elegiac beauty and tenderness of the verse address themselves with more appealing force. Its simplicity and quaintness add a singular charm, and as concerns its quality as poetry there can be, I think, but one opinion.

The story is simple. It is a lament and a vision. The father falls asleep on his daughter's grave, and, dreaming, sees in heaven Marguerite — his Pearl. They talk together, and then later there is much discussion of theological matters, and, at last, a rendering in verse of the apocalyptic vision of St. John.

The poem has interesting peculiarities of structure.

There are one hundred and one stanzas, each of twelve lines in three quatrains, all rhymed *a b – a b*. The alliteration of an earlier day is

still seen in the verse, but is less freely employed. Some one word of the final line of each stanza is repeated in the first line of the succeeding stanza.

The rhythms of this charming poem deserve closer study. The poet uses with delightful freedom lines of very varied length; usually they are octosyllabic.

The language of "Pearl" belongs to the Middle English of the west midland counties, and even now is not, as a whole, difficult if it be read aloud so as to address the mind through the ear rather than through the eye. Few, however, will be tempted to wrestle with the original version. But there is an excellent translation into unrhymed verse by Israel Gollancz.

For five hundred years this poem was unknown and lay hidden in the difficult writing of the fourteenth century. That this wail of grief appealed to Tennyson, even in its imperfect modern dress of unrhymed verse, may serve to excuse my effort to restore to its measures the melody and lifting wings of rhyme.

In many places I have used archaic words or such as now have meanings they had not in the

poet's day. Thus *pleasance* here means pleasure, and *courtesy* must be accepted as having more than its modern meaning. I owe an apology to Mr. Gollancz for my free use of his translation of "Pearl" into modern English. Without such a rendering, I should have been incompetent to follow with reasonable accuracy the meaning of the author.

For convenience of reference I have numbered the stanzas of my version in the order in which I give them. I have made no use of stanzas 12, 23, 24, 28, 30, 38, 39, 47, and of those between 49 and 96. The stanzas thus left out are either such as add little of value, or such as, in the larger gap, deal with uninteresting theological or allegorical material.

S. WEIR MITCHELL.

PEARL

LINES BY LORD TENNYSON

Prefatory to Mr. Israel Gollancz's version of Pearl

We lost you — for so long a time —
True Pearl of our poetic prime!
We found you, and you gleam re-set
In Britain's lyric coronet.

I

Pearl, for a prince's pleasance fair enow,
Right cleanly housed in gold so clear,
No orient pearl I dare avow
Was ever yet her precious peer.
So rounded, in such rare array,
So small, of smoothen comeliness,
I judged her of all jewels gay
As singly set in singleness.
Lost in mine arbour,— woe is me !
'Neath earth she lies with grass o'ergrown,
I mourn love's sweet anxiety
That spotless pearl had made my own.

II

There have I tarried ofttimes where below
It left my sight, to seek again the joy
That once was wont to scatter all my woe,
And lift my life above the world's annoy.
About my heart do ceaseless sorrows throng,
That constant grief must ever constant be —
Yet thought I never was so sweet a song
As the still hours thither brought to me.
Ah me! what thoughts are mine! I sit and dream
Of those fair colours clad, alas! in clay.
O earth! why hast thou marred this tender theme —
My spotless pearl, that was mine own alway?

III

What lavish fragrance here is spread
By herb and flower, newly won!
Of blossoms white and blue and red,
No gayer rise to greet the sun.
Here nor fruit nor flower may fade,
Where passed my pearl to night of ground;
From dead grain cometh fruitful blade,
Else never wheat had harvest found.
Ever 't is good that good doth bring,
Such seemly seed it faileth not;
Here ever-fragrant flowers shall spring
O'er thee, my pearl without a spot.

IV

That place I sweeten with gentle rhyme,
I came to, where was my arbour green,
In the high season of August time,
When corn is cut with the sickle keen.
Where pearl lay under the grassy mead,
Shadowed it was with leafage green,
Gillyflower, ginger, and gromwell seed,
And peonies powdered all between.
Fair and seemly the sight was seen,
Fairer fragrance earth knoweth not;
Worthily won it was, I ween,
Of pearl, the precious, without a spot.

V

I gazed, my hands together pressed,
For, chilled with care and sorrow caught,
My heart beat wildly in my breast,
Though reason sager counsel taught.
I wept my pearl in earthy cell,
And timid reason fought with doubt;
Though Christ did comfort me full well,
Weak will with woe me cast about.
Such soothing scents the air did fill
That, lulled on this rose-peopled plot,
By sleep o'ercome, I rested still
Above my pearl without a spot.

VI

Thence sped my spirit far through space,
My body tranced upon the ground,
My soul's quick ghost by God's sure grace
Adventuring where be marvels found.
I wist not where on earth that place
With cloven cliffs, so high and sheer,
But toward a wood I set my face,
Borne whither radiant rocks appear.
Their light more golden than the sun,
A gleaming glory glinted thence:
Was never web of mortals spun
So wondrous fair to mortal sense.

VII

The hill-sides there were brightly crowned
With crystal cliffs so clear of kind,
And wood-sides, set with boles around,
Shone blue as is the blue of Inde.
On every branch, with light between,
The leaves of quivering silver hung;
Through gleaming glades with shimmering sheen
The light fell glistering them among.
The gravel rolled upon the shore
Was precious pearls of Orient.
The sun's bright beams were pale before
That sight so fair of wonderment.

VIII

My spirit there forgot its woe,
So wondrous were those charméd hills.
Rare flavoured fruits thereon did grow,
Fit food to cure all human ills.
In fair accord the birds flew by,
Like wingéd flames, both great and small,
Nor cittern string nor minstrelsy
Might hope to match their joyous call:
For when the air their red wings beat,
Full choir sang they rapturously.
No greater joy a man could greet
Than this to hear, and that to see.

IX

Past all that eye of man has seen,
Past any wealth of words he hath,
The beauty of those wood-ways green,
The witchery of that wooing path.
Still on I pressed, as one who goes
Companioned by a joyous mood,
Through deepening dells where richly rose
Fair flowers by winsome breezes wooed.
Hedge-rows and marsh where wild fowl breed
I saw, and lo! a golden band —
A wonder that did all exceed —
A sunlit river cleft the strand.

X

O marvellous river, broad and deep,
With banks that beam with beryl bright!
As music sweet the waters sweep,
Or gently murmur low and light.
From darkened depths shone jewels fine,
As gleams through glowing glass the light,
As quivering stars in the welkin shine,
When tired men sleep of a winter night.
Each little stone that stream below
Was emerald green, or sapphire gent;
From them the light did leap and glow,
To daze a man with wonderment.

XI

Wondrous glamour of down and vale,
Wood and water and noble plain,
Did build me bliss and made me hale,
Routed sorrow and cured my pain.
Low bowed beside the stream I strayed,
With breed of joys my mind was glad;
The more I walked by mere and glade,
More strength of joy my spirit had.
Fortune fares where likes she still,
Sends she solace or evil sore,
The wight on whom she works her will
Hath ever of either more and more.

XII

More and more, and yet far more,
I longed to see beyond the strand;
For if 't was fair on the nearer shore,
More lovelike was that farther land.
I stayed my steps,—I stood at gaze,
To find a ford I sought,— alas!
Beside the strand, as in a maze,
I won not any way to pass.
Though peril in my path might stand,
I recked not, where such treasures were;
But fresh delights were nigh at hand,
That did my wondering spirit stir.

XIII

What wonder more did daunt my sight?
I saw beyond that mystic mere
A shining cliff of crystal bright,
With royal rays, as morning clear.
At foot there sat a little maid —
A maid of grace, and debonair;
In glistening white was she arrayed,
Well known long ere I saw her there.
More radiant than refinéd gold,
She stood in sunshine on the shore.
Long did my sight that vision hold,
And more I knew her, more and more.

XIV

Long feasted I on her dear face,
The lissome curves her figure wore,
Until the gladness of her grace
My heart's guest was as ne'er before.
Her gentle name I fain had called,
But stayed was I with wonderment,
So strange the place I stood appalled,
My eager gaze upon her bent.
Then turned on me her visage fair,—
As ivory white the face she wore.
Heart-struck was I to see her there,
And still I loved her more and more.

XV

Yearning had I by dread opposed.
I stood full still, I durst not call,
With eyes wide open and mouth full closed,
Like to a well-trained hawk in hall.
Hope had I for my soul's behoof;
Fear had I it might thus befall,
That she I longed for might stay aloof,
Or pass forever beyond recall.
Lo! uprose that child of grace,
Slender, small, and seemly slight,—
Rose right royal with lifted face,
A precious maid, with pearls bedight.

XVI

When, fresh as dewy fleur-de-lys,
Adown the bank she moved toward me,
High fortuned he on earth that sees
Such peerless pearls of empery.
As white as snow her amice gleams,
Her waist a lustrous broidery
Of pearls a man might see in dreams,
But never else on earth could see.
Full ample hung her sleeves, I ween;
Twain braided they with pearles bright.
Her kirtle green alike was seen,
With pearls of price around bedight.

XVII

A crown did wear that maiden girl
Of margerys, and none other stone.
High pinnacled, of clear white pearl,
It glowed with flowers wrought thereon.
Her head no other gem did grace;
Her hair half hid her neck from view.
In statelihood of mighty place
She stood more white than whale tooth's hue.
Her loosened locks, that gold exceed,
Flowed wandering, o'er her shoulders curled;
Though dark their gold, they scarce did need
For contrast fair her robe impearled.

XVIII

Bravely broidered was every hem,
On sleeve and vest fair broidery lay
Of white pearls and no other gem,
And glossy shone her white array.
A wonder pearl without a taint
Lay moon-white where her bodice met;
Soul of man might falter and faint
Ere mind of man its price could set.
Tongue of man might ne'er be sure
With fitting words to tell aright
How spotless white and virgin pure
Was that rare pearl, my soul's delight.

XIX

Decked with pearls, that precious piece
Of Heaven's make came down the strand;
My grief won wings of glad release
When that I saw her nearer stand.
None else of kin were dear as she,
And joyful then was my surprise
When seemed it she would speak to me,
And courteous bowed in woman wise.
She doffed her crown of jewels bright,
With low obeisance bending blithe.
Leave to answer that pearl of light
Made worth it well to be alive.

XX

"O Pearl, so gay with pearls," quoth I,—
"O Pearl that in my loneliness
Art yearned for when at night I lie
Sole comrade of my own distress,—
Since over thee the grasses twine,
No love to mine with love replies.
May liking, love, and joy be thine,—
The strifeless bourne of Paradise.
Such weird as brought thee hither here,
With plight of sorrow hath me undone;
Now are we twayned that were so dear,
And in love's life were but as one."

XXI

High crowned with pearls of Orient,
Looked up at me with fair blue eyes
That gracious maid with grave intent,
And sober spake in courtly wise.
"Sir, the tale is by half mistold
To say thy pearl is all perdue,
That a comely coffer in guard doth hold,
In flowered gardens, gay to view,
Where she may ever dwell and play,
Where sin nor sorrow come never near.
Safe should such treasury seem alway
If thou didst love thy jewel dear.

XXII

"Gentle Sir," said the maiden gem,
"Why do men jest? Distraught ye be.
Three words hast said, and all of them
Forsooth are folly,— yea, all the three.
Thou knowest not what thy words may mean;
Quick words thy tardy wits outfly.
Dost surely think that I here am seen
Because thou seest with mortal eye.
Thou sayest, too, that thou, alas!
May bide with me in this domain.
The way this stream to freely pass
No living wight may know to gain.

XXIII

"Small praise that man would have of me
That trusts the wisdom of the eye.
Much to be blamed and graceless he
That thinks the Lord could speak a lie,—
Our Lord who promised thy life to raise,
Though fortune bid thy body die!
Ye read his words in crooked ways
To trust alone what sees the eye:
And that is a fault of haughtiness
Doth ill a righteous man beseem,
To trow no tale has worthiness
Unless his reason so may deem.

XXIV

"Think now thyself if it be well
Of God such words as thine to say.
Dost think in this fair land to dwell?
Methinks 't were better his leave to pray:
And yet might fail thine eager quest.
Ere thou shalt pass that watery way
Thou first must find another rest,
And cold must lie thy corse in clay;
For it was marred in Paradise,
Where our yore-father wrought it loss,—
Through dreary death thy journey lies
Ere God will give thee leave to cross.

XXV

"Thou thinkest sorrow is naught but dole.
Why dost thou make this vain pretence?
For lesser loss the wailing soul
May lose far more than he laments.
Shouldst rather hold thee blessed by it,
And love thy God in weal and woe,
For anger helpeth thee no whit,
And man must bear what all must know.
Though thou shouldst prance as any doe,
And fret and chafe in mad unrest,
Thou canst not any further go,—
Abide thou must what He thinks best."

XXVI

Then spake I to that demoiselle —
"Let not my Lord be wroth with me.
As from a spring quick waters well,
Leaps forth my speech so wild and free.
My lonely heart is sorrow-scarred,
In misericorde of Christ I rest,
Rebuke me not with words so hard,
Forlorn am I, adored and best.
Thy kindly comfort me afford
With piteous thinking upon this —
Of care and me ye made accord
Who once were ground of all my bliss.

XXVII

"Thou hast been both my bale and bliss,
But greater is the bale I moan.
On every field my pearl I miss,
I wist not where my pearl has flown.
With clearer sight is sorrow eased.
Ere parting came we were at one.
Forbid it, God, we be displeased,
Though meet we not beneath the sun.
Though tender sweet thy courtesy,
I am but earth, my joy is gone;
Gone every hope of help for me
Save mercy of Christ, Marie, and John.

XXVIII

" I see thee with thy comrade, joy.
Ah, think of me when thou art glad;
Sad hours my ageing life annoy,
A lonely man bereft and sad.
But now, within thy presence here
I fain would bide, and patient wait
That ye may tell — ah, pearl most dear —
What life ye have both early and late.
Full glad am I that thy estate
Is changed to worship and to weal;
Where thou hast passed to lofty state—
There lies the only joy I feel."

XXIX

"To know if here the life is led
Be glad, will that thy grief assuage.
Thou knowest when thy pearl lay dead
Full young was I, of tender age.
Lo! I am bride of Christ the Lamb!
Through sacred Godhead wedded sure;
A crownéd queen of bliss I am,
Through days that shall for aye endure.
Who have his love do hold in fee
This heritage. I am his alone;
His priceless glory is to me
The source of every joy I own."

XXX

"Ah, Pearl of bliss, can this be true?
Let not my error bid me rue.
Art thou the Queen of heaven's blue
That all the world does honour to?
Art her we worship, the spring of grace,
Who bare a Child of virgin flower?
Ah, none can take her crown and place,
That pass her not in worth and power.
For singleness of gentillesse
We call her phenix of Araby,—
The bird none match in stateliness,
Like to that Queen of Courtesy."

XXXI

"Ay, Queen of Courtesy!" she said;
And lowly knelt and hid her face.
"Matchless mother and merriest maid!
Blest beginner of all our grace."
Then rose she up and 'gan to speak,
And looked at me across the space.
"Though many find what here they seek,
None here may take another's place.
The heavens do her empire make,
Of earth and hell the Queen is she;
Her heritage may no one take,
For she is Queen of Courtesy."

XXXII

"Yea, courtesy, I well believe,
And charity do here belong.
Let not my words thy goodness grieve —
To me thy speech still seemeth wrong.
Thyself to set so high in heaven
As queen to make of one so young —
What honour more might him be given
That in the world by grief was wrung,
And bought his bliss by years of bale —
Yea, lived in penance wearily?
No lesser honour him could fail
Than King be crowned by courtesy.

XXXIII

"Such courtesy too free appears,
If that be sooth which thou dost say.
On earth were thine but two brief years,
Never couldst thou God please or pray,
Knew never neither pater nor creed,—
But queen outright on thy death day,—
I may not trow it, so God me speed,
That God should rule so wrong a way.
Countess or demoiselle, par ma fay,
Were fair to be in heaven's estate,
Or else a lady of less array,—
But queen! it were too high a fate."

XXXIV

"His goodness hath nor mete nor bound,"
Said then to me this worthsome wight;
"For all is truth where he is found,
Nought can he do but that is right.
This Matthew doth for thee express,
Writ clear in gospel sooth aright,
Ensampled plain for easy guess,
A parable of heavenly light."
"My realm," saith Christ, "is like, on high,
A lord's that had a vineyard fair,
When lo! the vintage time was nigh,
And men must to his vines repair.

XXXV

" Right well his men the season know,
So up full early that lord arose
To send them where his vines did grow,
And unto some did there propose
A penny a day to be their gain.
With this accord forthwith they go,
And toil and labour with honest pain,
And prune and carry, go to and fro.
At noon this lord the market seeks,
And finds men standing idle here.
' Why stand ye idle? ' thus he speaks.
' Now know ye not the time of year? '

XXXVI

"'We hither came ere day begun,'
This was their answer, one and all.
'Here have we stood since rose the sun,
And no man yet on us doth call.
'Go to my vineyard, work aright,
And rest ye sure,' that lord did say,
'What wages fair ye earn by night,
In very sooth I will surely pay.'
Into his vines they went and wrought,
The while he came, and came again,
And new men into his vineyard brought,
Until the day was on the wane.

XXXVII

"At close of day, at evensong,
An hour before the sun had fled,
He saw there idle men and strong,
And unto them he gently said:
'Why stand ye idle all day long?'
'No man,' they said, 'has come to hire.'
'Go to my vines, ye yeomen strong,
And work your best, as I desire.'
Soon the world grew dusk and gray,
The sun went down, it waxéd late;
He summoned them to take their pay —
The hour had come for which they wait.

XXXVIII

"That lord well knew the time of day,
And bade his steward pay them all.
'Give every man his proper pay;
And that no blame on me may fall,
Set ye all of them in a row,
And give alike a penny to each.
Begin with him that stands most low,
Until the first his wage shall reach.'
Thereon the first did quick complain:
'My lord, we toiled full long and sore;
These last have had but little pain,
Our wage should justly be far more.'

XXXIX

"Then said this lord, 'In sooth, I try
To use mine own as seemeth meet.
Why turn on me an evil eye,
Who justice seek and no man cheat?'
Quoth Christ, 'I now do thus decree,
The first shall be the last, and those
Who latest came the first shall be,—
Of many called but few be chose.'
Thus do poor men win their way,
Though late they come and low their state;
If brief has been their labour day,
The more of grace doth them await.

XL

" More bliss have I, and joy herein
Of ladyship, and life's delight,
Than all the men on earth might win
If all they sought were theirs by right.
Although the night was nigh at hand
When came I to the vines at even,
Among the first God bade me stand,
And fullest wage to me was given.
Yet others waited there in vain,
Who toiled and sweated long of yore,
And still no wage repaid their pain,
And may not for a year or more."

XLI

The Lamb's delight none doubted there.
Though seemed he hurt and wounded sore,
Yet glorious glad his glances were,
And nought of pain his semblance bore.
I looked among his radiant host,
Quick with eternal life,— and lo!
I saw my pearles gentle ghost,
I loved and lost so long ago.
Lord! much of mirth that maiden made
Among her peers, so pure and white.
I yearned to cross — all unafraid,
So longed my love — so dear the sight.

XLII

Delight held captive eye and ear;
My mortal mind toward madness drave,
I would be there where stayed my dear,
Beyond that river's mystic wave.
Methought that none would do so ill
As me to halt, if now I tried;
And if at start none checked my will,
Fain would I venture though I died.
Anon, from bold resolve I fell
When I would take that peril's chance;
In that rash mood I dare not dwell —
Not so my Prince's fair pleasance.

XLIII

It pleased not God that I come near,
Or think to cross that guarding mere,
Aghast I stood, alone with fear—
Alone, and she no longer here.
For, as I stood beside the stream,
I wakened in that arbour's shade.
Gone was the gladness of my dream!
My head was on that hillock laid
Where over her the roses grow.
Heartsore I lay upon the sod,
And to myself I murmured low:
"Blest be my maid in care of God."

XLIV

So hard it was to drift away
From that fair region all too soon,
From sights so gallant, blithe and gay,
That weak with hurt I seemed to swoon,
And ruefully my head I bowed.
"O Pearl," said I, "of rare renown!
O, news of joy!" I cried aloud,
"In this glad vision sent me down.
And if thy tale in sooth be so,
And thou art clad in joy's delight,
Well am I in this home of woe,
Since thou hast pleased the Prince's sight."

XLV

If to God's pleasure I had but bent,
And craved no more than man is given,
And held me humble, with this content,
As prayed that pearl in goodness thriven, —
Then by God's grace I were less amiss,
More mysteries my soul had won;
But man doth have more greed of bliss
Than life may give ere life be done.
Therefore too soon my joy was riven,
And I exiled from realms eterne.
Lord! mad are they with thee have striven,
For what doth not thy pleasure earn!

XLVI

To win the Prince's love aright
For Christen men is an easy end.
Yea, I have found him, by day and night,
A God, a Lord, full firm a friend.
Befell me this on that mound's green sod, —
For sorrow of Pearl there lay I prone,
And this my jewel gave o'er to God,
In Christ's dear blessing and eke mine own.
Christ, that in form of bread and wine,
The priest doth show, wherein God grants
To us his servants here a sign
That we be pearls of his pleasance.

AN AFTERWORD

A little grave, a nameless man's distress,
And lo ! a wail of lyric tenderness,
Unheard, unseen for half a thousand years,
Asks from love's equal loss the praise of tears.

S. WEIR MITCHELL.

DATE DUE

FACULTY
JUN 15 '88
JUN 15 1982
FEB 4 '74
JUN 15 1982
MAR 3 '81

GAYLORD

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

PR2111 .A3
Pearl : rendered into modern English
Princeton Theological Seminary–Speer Library
1 1012 00075 3337